



HANNAHS *in the Pew*

by Christopher Esget
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She was overwhelmed with grief and sorrow. Her husband loved her, but still she felt cursed by God. Indeed, she felt that ancient curse spoken over the first woman: “I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children” (Gen. 3:16). Who is this woman? These words describe Hannah, but many other Hannahs sit in the pews of our churches, empty, sad, bearing with bitterness the curse in their bodies.

Some women feel the pain in childbearing; others feel the pain of not having this gift. And then there are the children who are no more, who never draw breath, passing away without funeral, the only baby shower being the tears of parents grieving in secret. Why? There is no answer, not for any particular woman. God’s ways are hidden from us. Some women pass all of their days without a little one to cradle, while other women wait years in silent grief until they have a child to mother. Abraham’s wife Sarah. Isaac’s wife Rebekah. Jacob’s wife Rachel. Elizabeth, who became in her old age mother of John the Baptist.

And then here is Hannah. Her prayers are not polite; she breaks all decorum and does so in the place of sacrifice. “And she was in

bitterness of soul, and prayed to the Lord and wept in anguish” (1 SAM. 1:10 NKJV).

If we are going to discuss care for those suffering infertility, miscarriage and other tragedies, we most need to understand that bitterness of soul experienced by so many women—and not women only, but also men who long to be fathers. One picture will not do; the grief and heartaches, the spiritual challenges people face are different.

THE CROSSES OF THE BARREN

The barren woman feels isolated. My wife and I adopted a little boy, James, just over a year ago. We had numerous visits with our social worker after placement before the adoption could be finalized. At one of the first visits, she asked us, “Have you discovered the club yet?” She meant the parenting club, and I had been oblivious to it before. Now, however, my conversations had turned from sports statistics to sleeping statistics and shameless comparisons of the color and consistency of infant excrement. There was a secret society that had been holding meetings in broad daylight! Well, that society was secret to me, but it isn’t secret at all to the barren woman. She

is isolated and excluded. These are not high school cliques, but in some ways they're worse, because the only way in is a baby.

The barren person feels like a disappointment, a disappointment to husband or wife anxious for a child, a disappointment to parents anxious to be grandparents. No matter how loving and patient these are, the barren person cannot shake the feeling, "I've let everybody down." Eventually people begin prodding, "When are you going to start a family?" which communicates to the barren couple that they are not a real family. And just as the culture has begun to judge "breeders" for having children, so there is an opposite judgment of the childless for their selfishness, and the barren feel indicted by that unjust judgment, made more bitter by their longing.

These are problems not from secular Western culture, but problems that arise within the culture of our churches. If you have cancer, we'll put you on the prayer list. If you are pregnant, we'll put you on the prayer list. But if you are struggling to get pregnant, the church does not publicly remember you or acknowledge you. Like mental illness, the crosses of barrenness and miscarriage are often treated as taboo. That's inside the Church. What's influencing us from the outside?

CULTURAL CATECHESIS: WHAT DOGMAS DOMINATE THE WESTERN WORLD?

A core problem in our culture is the idea of autonomy: that we are laws unto ourselves, that to each individual belongs the right to make every decision concerning sexuality, marriage and parenthood, even when these things contravene nature. The Church must address how the concepts of choice and control dominate our own thinking about children and family. The culture indoctrinates us with these ideas:

- Having children is a choice.
- Pro-choice is not just about abortion, but about the decision to pursue pregnancy.

Thus even the most pious Christian marriages begin with the assumption that children are not gifts from God given in His good time, but lifestyle choices according to our timing. And it would be best to wait. Wait until school is finished, until we have enough money, until we have a large enough house, until we are ready.

And while we are waiting, we use birth control. Note that language of control; our will dominates. The natural functioning of the body and one of the principal purposes of marriage is willfully subverted in an attempt to keep God from controlling, to keep God from giving us a blessing that we are terrified will be a curse.

At the core of this focus on control is the lie that we are the masters of our destiny, that we can shape life according to our will. I don't mean to upset anyone for airing my antediluvian views on contraception. But wherever you come down on that question, I hope you can see how the acceptance of that worldview, where

childbearing is a matter of our choice and within our control, sets the stage for deep confusion and heartache when the god of our self-directed future turns against us.

SPIRITUAL CARE

Barrenness is not a sin, but it is the result of sin, and it also can produce many sins. Fortunately, the Church has the one thing that can address all of this: the Absolution. We need to name these inner struggles our people face. Ponder the burdens our people have: resentment, anger, the loss of control, disappointment, isolation, jealousy and envy at seeing fertile families. Name those sins, burdens and hurts. You don't have clichés or pat answers; you don't know the mind of God. But you can tell people about Jesus, who says to them the same thing that my kind parishioner said to me: "We love you and are hurting for you." That's the meaning of the incarnation: "God said to His beloved Son: 'It's time to have compassion. Then go, bright jewel of My crown, And bring to all salvation. From sin and sorrow set them free; Slay bitter death for them that they May live with You forever'" (*LSB 556:5*).

Spiritual care in the instance of a miscarriage or barrenness is not a singular event. Though it may lessen over time, the grief remains with them. Don't regard it as a bad event in the past, but in your preaching, public and private prayers and personal words, be ever mindful of their grief, sorrow, resentment, loneliness, and all the other terrible ways the devil assaults the heart and conscience.

Offer absolution to the hurting, not only for specific sins, but for the contagion of sin causing this brokenness and the sins committed against them. Pray regularly in the public prayers for those who long to have children and those who have lost children to abortion, miscarriage and still-birth. Be sensitive to the unintentionally excluded. This doesn't mean that you can't have events, groups or recognitions of particular vocations. But remember that when we talk about marriage, there are people who long to be married but have not found a spouse. When we celebrate children, there are people who are childless. Remember them with compassion.

God calls us to unexpected, even undesired, vocations. He uses these to teach us and to be a blessing to others. Preach contentment in the vocations we have, not the ones we wish we had. Our identity is not found in what we accomplish or by what we lack. Our identity is found in Jesus. Most importantly, we speak to the hurting the joy of the atonement. We preach Jesus, who is with us in all our brokenness and loss and will at the last wipe every tear from our eyes. In that day of new creation, the former things will be forgotten, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

This presentation was originally given at the Infertility Ethics Symposium at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, on Nov. 8, 2014. To read the presentation in its entirety, visit bit.ly/1DeiGMe. ☞

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